

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Rob Portman

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY & GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
“VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM: EXAMINING THE THREAT TO HOUSES OF
WORSHIP AND PUBLIC SPACES.”

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AS PREPARED

Thank you, Chairman Peters, for holding this hearing to discuss the elevated threat of violence and terrorism against our houses of worship. Just over two months ago, a terrorist made his way into Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas and held four people hostage for over ten hours. The perpetrator, Malik Faisal Akram, traveled to the United States from the United Kingdom with the intent to commit violence and terrorism.

I’m concerned that this attack wasn’t prevented. Why was this person not on the government’s radar, considering his criminal record and history of being investigated for terrorism in the U.K.? Why was he granted access to the United States under the Visa Waiver Program, especially after he lied on his paperwork to CBP? In spite of his unmistakably dangerous past, he was able to travel to the United States, fly again from New York to Texas, illegally purchase a firearm. It was only *after* he attacked a synagogue that our law enforcement or homeland security officials detected the threat.

The incident in Colleyville was a blatant act of antisemitism and terrorism against the Jewish community. For too long, Jews in the United States have been targeted and attacked for their faith, facing threats of harassment and violence at an exceptionally high rate—Jews are the target of more than half of all religious-bias crimes, yet only make up two percent of the entire U.S. population.

This antisemitic violence has taken the lives of too many people. In 2019, one person was killed and three were injured at the horrific attack against the Chabad of Poway in California. In 2018, 11 congregants were killed and six were injured at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pennsylvania. In the last five years, antisemitic incidents across the country have nearly doubled.

Threats of violence go beyond just targeting the Jewish community. I often hear from faith leaders in Ohio that the Christian, Muslim, and Sikh communities continue to face threats of terrorism and violence. According to the Global Terrorism Database, terrorist attacks against religious institutions accounted for over 25 percent of all terrorist attacks within the United States between 2009 and 2019. That statistic is deeply troubling and threatens our First Amendment right to freedom of religion.

Terrorists and extremists often target crowded spaces with little to no security. Three years ago, an assailant with white supremacist views, targeting the Mexican community, opened fire at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas killing 23 and injuring 24 innocent people. The following night, an assailant with extremist left-wing views killed nine and injured 27 on a busy Dayton street, in my home state of Ohio.

After seeing the devastating effects of terrorism across our houses of worship and communities, we are lucky that the attack at Congregation Beth Israel this January didn't end in the loss of innocent life. While the ultimate goal is to prevent these attacks from happening in the first place, this incident showed us how preparedness and security can prevent violent attacks from escalating to lethal ones.

Congregation Beth Israel was a recipient of FEMA's Nonprofit Security Grant Program. The NSGP funded the synagogue's camera system, among other things, which improved the facility's overall security and provided first responders with situational awareness during the standoff.

I've been a longtime supporter of the NSGP. In 2019, I authored its first authorization, working to expand it across all fifty states. I also worked to double the funds from \$90 million to \$180 million. In January, I led a letter to the Appropriations Committee for increasing funding for NSGP to a level that reflects the growing terrorist threat to nonprofits and houses of worship. Last week, I was pleased to see Congress appropriate \$250 million to the grant program for Fiscal Year 2022.

In addition to the NSGP, Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, who was a hostage in Colleyville, has credited security workshops and training sessions by federal and local law enforcement, and nonprofit organizations, for providing the knowledge that saved his life. Unfortunately, many religious communities still don't know

how to access these trainings or grants available through the NSGP. We need to do better.

That's why last year, I introduced the bipartisan Pray Safe Act with Senators Hassan, Peters, Johnson, Rosen, and Rounds. The Pray Safe Act directs the federal government to establish a centralized clearinghouse of safety and security best practices, training opportunities, grant application information, and other assistance—all dedicated to securing houses of worship against threats of terrorism and violence. In the aftermath of the Colleyville attack, it is more necessary than ever that Congress quickly passes this legislation.

As we work to prevent violent incidents from occurring we must acknowledge that religious communities and other targets of terrorism are threatened by actors that hold a variety of ideological belief systems and motivations. And, we cannot lose sight of the fact that there are concerning trends and threats posed by both homegrown and international terrorists.

I thank the witnesses for their testimony and their commitment to keeping Americans safe and thank Chairman Peters for holding this hearing.